

Valerie at Pensacola State College Health Profession Opportunity Grant

Valerie says that persistence and determination are the two words that describe her educational journey. Even those assets would not have seen her through, though, if she had not had help from a Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance.

Valerie began the quest to earn her Registered Nursing degree in August 2007. In the second year of nursing school, she was notified that she had exhausted her Pell Grant funds. She appealed the decision and was granted one more opportunity to finish her education, with the stipulation that if she failed any class, it would end her Pell Grant support. She pressed on and tried even harder to get through school so that she could better care for her family.

Then Valerie's husband became extremely ill. He was in and out of the hospital and lost a lot of time from work. She was left with caring for their two children and trying to balance school, home, and finances. It seemed that the only answer was to apply for a loan because she could not work full time, go to school full time, take care of two children, study, and run back and forth to the hospital. Soon Valerie was drowning in the sea of personal debt and student loans, and the stress of handling school and family needs was almost too much for her. Her education suffered. With just one more term to complete before graduation, she failed the class by only two points.

Valerie says that at that point she should have taken some time to get her life together before trying to finish school, but instead she immediately re-enrolled, thinking she would be successful because failure was not an option. Sadly, conditions at home only became worse, and she missed the mark again by three points, causing her to lose her Pell Grant and her scholarships. The department head told her she would have to wait two years, reapply to the program, and repeat the entire two years of nursing school. Valerie was utterly devastated. She felt like a fool and a failure.

Two and a half years later, while working as a Health Support Technician in a local elementary school clinic, Valerie had an overwhelming desire to pursue her nursing degree again. She found the new director of the college's nursing department very willing to assist her. That director urged her to obtain her Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) license and then return to school via the LPN to RN (Registered Nurse) Career Mobility program. By taking this route and receiving credit for all of her previously completed courses, she could become an RN in three terms. Still, she had one enormous barrier: no financial aid.

Valerie had appealed for reinstatement of her Pell Grant but had been denied three times. She had a stack of student loans that she was unable to repay and no way to take out more loans. The department head advised her to get her LPN license and not worry about the rest. Valerie followed the advice, and within a couple of months she had her LPN license. She applied for the

Career Mobility program and was accepted. Still, the big question was how she would pay for her classes. She had to resign from her job due to conflicts between class times and work. By this time, her husband was also unemployed due to his medical condition, and he was being considered for disability benefits. In faith, she took the step, though leaving her job seemed ludicrous at the time.

Again Valerie met with the nursing department head and was told about a new grant program at the college called HPOG. She completed the required paperwork and was one of the first 50 students to be accepted into the program. She was overjoyed to learn that HPOG would do whatever it took to remove barriers that could prevent her from completing the RN program. HPOG paid her tuition and bought uniforms and supplies. Soon Valerie was informed that her husband had been approved for disability benefits. She was happy to know that income would be available for bills and food.

HPOG helped Valerie remove many roadblocks on her journey, providing food, utility, and gasoline assistance. However, she says the most important aspect of HPOG was the personal support she received from her case manager. At their regular meetings, the case manager would always ask how things were going at home and at school and ask if Valerie needed anything. Valerie felt like the case manager was not doing just her job but had a genuine interest in her success. She says that the entire HPOG staff always demonstrated a caring attitude, a willingness to accommodate, and a joyful spirit. She could see that they loved their jobs and were genuinely interested in student success.

In Valerie's opinion, the HPOG program was a godsend. It provided for her educational needs and her personal needs as well, and it enabled her to concentrate more on school and to ultimately achieve her goal. For her it was a life-changing program. Valerie is now a licensed RN who is gainfully employed at a local healthcare facility. She and her family are doing well.